

# Substance, Attribute, and Mode in Spinoza

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## Abstract

Some of Spinoza's most well-known doctrines concern what kinds of beings there are and how they are related to each other. For example, he claims that: (1) there is only one substance; (2) this substance has infinitely many attributes; (3) this substance is God or nature; (4) each of these attributes express the divine essence; and (5) all else is a mode of the one substance. These claims have so astonished many of his readers that some of them have surely concluded that they must not know what Spinoza means by "substance," "attribute," and "mode." In this article I shall try to explain how Spinoza understands the basic ontological categories denoted by these expressions.

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## 1. Introduction

Some of Spinoza's most well-known doctrines concern what kinds of beings there are and how they are related to each other. For example, he claims that: (1) there is only one substance; (2) this substance has infinitely many attributes; (3) this substance is God or nature; (4) each of these attributes express the divine essence; and (5) all else is a mode of the one substance. These claims have so astonished many of his readers that some of them have surely concluded that they must not know what Spinoza means by "substance," "attribute," and "mode." In this article I shall try to explain how Spinoza understands the basic ontological categories denoted by these expressions.

## 2. Substance

The category substance has been called upon to play a wide variety of theoretical roles. For example, substances are said to be (a) the ultimate subjects of predication; (b) independent beings; (c) the things which persist through changes; (d) the explanatory grounds of things; (e) true unities; (f) the essences of things; and (g) the answer to the question, What is Being? Although Spinozistic substances arguably play many of these roles, Spinoza does not define substance in terms of any of them. Instead, he defines it as that which is "in itself and conceived through itself" (1d3).<sup>1</sup> That is, he

defines substance in terms of self-inherence and conceptual independence. The first step, then, toward understanding Spinozistic substance is understanding Spinoza's account of inherence and conception and how, correlatively, he understands self-inherence and conceptual independence.

Leibniz, always an astute reader of Spinoza, notes an obscurity in Spinoza's definition of substance.<sup>2</sup> The definition admits of two readings and it is not clear which reading Spinoza intends. On the first reading, the definition says that something is a substance just in case it exists in itself or is conceived through itself. On the second reading, the definition says that something is a substance just in case it both exists in itself and is conceived through itself. Consideration of other Spinozistic doctrines, however, reveals that Spinoza intends the second reading. Indeed, for him, inherence implies conception. As Don Garrett points out, Spinoza infers from the definition of substance and the definition of a mode – that which “is in another, through which it is conceived” – that everything is either a substance or a mode (Garrett 15–16). That is, he denies the possibility that something could exist in itself and be conceived through another. In other words, if  $x$  inheres in  $y$ , then  $x$  is conceived through  $y$ .

Having noted that inherence is a sufficient condition for conception, our next task is to understand Spinoza's notion of conception, and more specifically, how he construes the *conceived-through* relation (as in “ $x$  is conceived through itself”). As Michael Della Rocca (*Representation* 3–4) has persuasively argued, Spinoza thinks of conception as explanation. This can be seen in 2p7s where Spinoza says that in perceiving effects through their causes we are explaining the order of nature. Spinoza often uses “perceives” and “conceives” interchangeably, so we can equally say that in conceiving effects through their causes we are explaining the order of nature. Della Rocca also points out that in 1a5, Spinoza writes:

Things that have nothing in common with one another also cannot be understood through one another, or the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other.

Here Spinoza treats “the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other” as a paraphrase of “one cannot be understood through the other.” Thus  $x$  is conceived through  $y$  just in case  $x$  is understood through  $y$ . If we say that explanation is what generates understanding, then we can also say that  $x$  is conceived through  $y$  just in case  $x$  is explained by  $y$ .

Both conception and inherence are also related to causation for Spinoza.<sup>3</sup> First of all, Spinoza believes that if  $x$  is caused by  $y$ , then  $x$  is conceived through  $y$ . This can be seen from his argument for the claim that, because substances are conceived through themselves, they must be self-caused as well. His reason for holding this is stated in 1a4: “Cognition of an effect involves and depends on cognition of its cause.” (This is, on the face of it,

an implausible claim. Intuitively, it would seem that one can think about many things without having any concept of their causes. For example, a doctor might think about a symptom without having any concept of its cause. A full account of Spinoza's understanding of 1a4 would reveal that it can accommodate many of the apparent counterexamples to it,<sup>4</sup> but such an account would, unfortunately, fall outside the scope of this article. Suffice it to note that Spinoza lays it down as an axiom.) That is, our ability to think about a thing depends upon our ability to think about its causes. But if a substance had an external cause, then, by 1a4, in order to think about that substance, we would also have to think about its cause, or, what is the same thing for Spinoza, we would have to possess the concept of its cause. Spinoza here seems to think that if we can't think about something without possessing the concept of its external cause, then it's not conceived through itself. And so, if a substance had an external cause, then it would not be conceived through itself. But substances are, by definition, conceived through themselves. So, they must be self-caused.

## 2.1. GOD

We have seen that Spinozistic substances are self-caused, conceived through themselves, and self-explanatory. These features of substance are importantly related to Spinoza's metaphysical rationalism. Metaphysical rationalism consists in a commitment to the claim that everything has a cause or reason.<sup>5</sup> There are no brute facts. There is a sufficient reason or explanation for everything. As we have seen, Spinoza understands a substance to be something that is self-caused and self-explained. Spinoza further believes that metaphysical rationalism entails that at least and at most one substance exists (1p14) and that this substance necessarily exists and is absolutely infinite (1p11), and consequently that this substance is God (according to Spinoza's definition, God is an absolutely infinite substance) and that all else inheres in this substance – that is, all else is explained by, caused by, and conceived through this substance. So, from the claim that there is a cause or reason for everything, it follows, according to Spinoza, that there is one thing which is the cause of reason for everything. Many philosophers are likely to suspect that such an inference commits a quantifier scope fallacy (like inferring from the claim that all things aim at some good to the claim that there is some good at which all things aim). But Spinoza's reasoning involves no such fallacy.

Here is Spinoza's argument.<sup>6</sup> If a substance didn't exist, there must be a cause or reason for its nonexistence. This cause or reason must either be internal to the substance – in other words, it must follow from the nature of substance – or external to the substance – either another substance or a mode of another substance. Now Spinoza believes that no two substances can share an attribute. This is because if they did, it would not be possible to distinguish them, and so their non-identity would be a brute fact, which

is ruled out by Spinoza's metaphysical rationalism.<sup>7</sup> As we have seen, Spinoza believes that effects must be conceived through their causes. (1a4) But two things that don't have an attribute in common have nothing in common, and so one can't be conceived through the other. (1p2) Causation entails conception. (1p3, which follows from 1a1 and 1a4.) So if one thing can't be conceived through another, then it can't be caused by it either. So, no substance can create or destroy another substance. (1p6) The mode of a substance cannot prevent another substance from existing because effects are conceived through their causes and substances aren't conceived through modes. (1d3) But if nonexistence of a substance were caused by a mode then the nonexistence of a substance would be conceived through a mode. We have thus ruled out every candidate for being the external cause of the nonexistence of a substance. So if there is a cause for the nonexistence of God, then that cause must be internal to the substance or follow from the very nature of God. How can a nature prevent the existence of its exemplifications? It can do so if it is contradictory. For example, the nature of a square circle prevents its own exemplification because it is constituted by incompatible properties. Spinoza claims that it would be absurd if the nature of an absolutely perfect being were incoherent.<sup>8</sup> So we have ruled out all possible causes for the nonexistence of God. This being so, if God didn't exist, this would have to be a brute fact. But Spinoza's metaphysical rationalism denies the possibility of brute facts. So it is impossible that God not exist. In other words, God necessarily exists.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2. MONISM

We have seen why Spinoza believes that at least one substance, God, necessarily exists. But he also believes that no other substance exists. (1p14) His reason for believing this is his commitment to the claim that no two substances can share an attribute. (1p5. See section 2 above for a brief discussion of this commitment.) Since God is an absolutely infinite substance (1d6), he is not limited in any way. (1d2) If there was an attribute that he didn't possess, he would be *ipso facto* limited. So, God possesses all attributes. If there was a substance other than God, it would have to share an attribute with God. But no two substances can share an attribute. So, there cannot be any substance other than God.

## 3. Attribute

In 1d4, Spinoza defines an attribute as "that which the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of a substance." There are many serious interpretative issues surrounding Spinoza's understanding of the attributes. In this article I shall focus on the question of what if anything distinguishes an attribute from a substance.

There is considerable textual evidence that suggests that attributes inhere in and are conceived through themselves. Given Spinoza's definition of substance as that which is in and conceived through itself, this would appear to entail that every attribute is a substance. Many commentators (e.g., Curley 16–18, Gueroult 48, Loeb 160–6) have accordingly concluded that attributes are substances and God is the substance that is composed of all substances constituted by single attributes. If this were correct, we could see Spinoza as a bundle theorist about substance. Every substance, on this interpretation, would be a bundle of attributes and every individual attribute would be a bundle with a single element and hence a substance. Call this the substantialist interpretation of Spinozistic attributes.

But this interpretation seems to contradict Spinoza's monism doctrine (stated in 1p14), which says, "Except God, no substance can be or be conceived." If God exists and God is a being with infinitely many attributes and every attribute is a substance, then, far from being the only substance, God must be only one substance among infinitely many others.

Louis Loeb has responded to the objection, by proposing an interpretation of 1p14 according to which it reads:

1. Except God, no substance can be or be conceived *which is not a constituent of God*.

According to Loeb, because every attribute, in addition to being a substance in its own right, is also a constituent of God, the existence of infinitely many substances is compatible with the monism doctrine expressed in 1p14. There are a number of problems with this response. First of all, could Spinoza reasonably believe that he could successfully communicate (1) by writing what he did in 1p14? It is not a natural reading of the text, and only by subtle and detailed consideration of many Spinozistic texts and doctrines could (1) ever appear to be a possible reading of 1p14. Thus, if we are to accept Loeb's response, we must also accept that Spinoza formulated one of his most important doctrines in a very careless way.

Another difficulty is that a similar strategy is available to the opponent of the substantialist interpretation. For example, the opponent of the substantialist interpretation could propose the following reading of 1d3:

2. For all  $x$ ,  $x$  is a substance just in case  $x$  inheres in and is conceived through itself and *is an object*.

The anti-substantialist assumes that attributes are not objects. (This assumption does not beg the question against the substantialist in any important way. The proposed interpretation is merely intended to demonstrate that the anti-substantialist interpretation does not contradict the text on at least one plausible reading.) Attributes cannot then be substances, even if they inhere in and are conceived through themselves. This move puts the opponent of the substantialist interpretation in a stronger dialectical

position than its supporters. First, the text itself suggests this reading. Here is the text of 1d3 in full:

By substance, I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of *another thing*, from which it must be formed. (my emphasis)

The expression “another thing” (*alterius rei*) creates the implicature that 1d3 pertains only to things or objects (just as the statement “John lives in New York and I have another friend who lives in DC” creates the implicature that John is a friend). Since attributes are standardly not conceived of as things or objects, they do not fall under the definition of substance. So, while the interpretation of 1p14 proposed by Loeb is not one that Spinoza could have reasonably hoped to communicate, the proposed interpretation of 1d3 is arguably forced upon us by the text.

Second, the substantial interpretation requires a more radical revision in our understanding of Spinoza. The proponent of that interpretation must claim that Spinoza is not really a substance monist and that his apparent commitment to monism is the result of leaving implicit a qualification that is not obviously suggested by any explicit textual material in 1p14. The opponent of the substantial interpretation need only claim that 1d3 is restricted to things, which is already strongly suggested by the text. Thus, the opponent of the substantial interpretation has a more conservative response to the textual evidence.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Mode

Spinoza introduces the term ‘mode’ in 1d5:

By mode I understand the states of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived.

And in 1p25c, Spinoza tells us that the finite particular things that populate our world are modes. Thus, it would appear, shoes, ships, cabbages, and kings are all modes. These two claims – that modes are states of a substance and that concrete particulars are modes – are together very puzzling. How can shoes and ships be states of a substance? Common sense tells us that they are objects, not states. Such puzzlement is only deepened when we consider the Cartesian heritage of the term “mode.”

Spinoza’s metaphysical vocabulary is largely borrowed from Descartes. Indeed, “substance,” “attribute,” and “mode” are Descartes’ names for what he takes to be the fundamental ontological categories. For Descartes, “substance” denotes ultimate subjects of predication, which are, for him, independent beings. “Attribute” denotes the unchanging features of a substance, which constitute its essence. “Mode” denotes the changing and accidental properties of a substance. This meaning is closely related to the meaning of the word in ordinary Latin which can be translated by “way” or “manner.”

According to the standard view, Spinoza's term "mode" denotes properties of substance, just as it does in Descartes' idiom. Hence, particular things are properties of the one substance. Curley has famously criticized the standard view, and argues that modes cannot be properties. A number of considerations lead Curley to this conclusion. I shall discuss two of them. The first consideration that supports this claim is that modes are individual things and are thus of the wrong logical type to be related to substance in the way that Cartesian modes are related to substances. That is, individual things cannot be predicated of a substance. For this reason, the standard view attributes a nonsensical doctrine to Spinoza. But, Curley argues, once we correctly understand Spinozistic inherence, we will not be tempted to saddle Spinoza with a nonsensical doctrine. He claims that Spinozistic inherence should be understood as causal dependence and not as predication. So, although Spinozistic modes inhere in substance (i.e., are caused by it), they are not predicated of it.

The second consideration is that modes of extension are the contents of modes of thought, i.e., ideas. Spinoza says that all ideas affirm their contents. In other words, all ideas are beliefs. But properties are not objects of belief.<sup>11</sup> To see this, consider the following sentence: "Idea *i* affirms being red." Sentences of this form are nonsensical. This observation supports Curley's negative thesis that modes are not properties. It also forms part of the basis of his positive claim that modes are facts. Only something with a propositional structure could be the object of an affirmation. Modes of extension are objects of affirmations. So, modes of extension have propositional structures. Facts also have propositional structure, so they are excellent candidates for being modes of extension. As noted earlier, Spinoza says that particular things are modes. So, on Curley's interpretation, the modes that are particular things must be something like singular facts, not concrete individuals like cabbages and kinds.<sup>12</sup> Although Curley's claim that modes are not properties has been widely discussed in the literature, this second consideration has received little or no attention. This is unfortunate because it is one of the more compelling considerations in favor of Curley's interpretation.

Against Curley, Bennett claims that such an interpretation "credits Spinoza not only with silently depriving 'mode' of half the meaning it had in Descartes's idiolect and in the Latin language generally, but with positively implying that he has not done so" (93). Bennett thinks that instead of identifying modes with particular things, Spinoza means to claim that what we normally treat as particular things must be treated by fundamental metaphysics as properties of a single substance. On Bennett's interpretation, all truths about, for example, modes of extension such as "Mount Everest is tall" can be paraphrased by something of the form "the extended substance is *G*." It might appear that it would be more precise to say that such statements can be paraphrased by something of the form "a region of the extended substance is *G*." But this is unacceptable. Regions of space cannot

be substances. There is only one substance but there are many regions of space. But neither can regions of space be properties. Sentences of the form “there is property of being a region that is *G*” cannot express the same facts as sentences of the form “there is a region of space that is *G*.” For example, while it is a theorem of a tendentious but coherent metaphysical theory that it is possible for a region of space to exemplify the property of being a tall mountain,<sup>13</sup> the idea that a property can exemplify the property of being a tall mountain is unintelligible. But Bennett argues that his interpretation does not require Spinoza to quantify over regions. The very same limitations that regions are intended to introduce can be expressed with adverbs such as “here” and “now.” So instead of saying something of the form “a region of the extended substance is *G*” we can simply say something of the form “the extended substance is *G* here and now.”<sup>14</sup>

James Van Cleve offers yet another interpretation of Spinozistic modes according to which modes are the entities which come into existence as a result of a substance (or another mode) exemplifying a property.<sup>15</sup> According to this view, Spinozistic modes are like dents, wrinkles, or fists. A dent is an entity that comes into existence when some object, a can for example, is dented. A wrinkle is an entity that comes into existence when, for example, a carpet is wrinkled. And a fist is an entity that comes into existence when a hand is closed. This interpretation is able to take account of two factors. One is that Spinoza claims that modes are particular things. The other is that the word “mode” – both in the Cartesian metaphysical vocabulary that Spinoza adopts and in ordinary discourse – denotes something adjectival. Fists and dents are clearly particular things. And there is also clear sense in which fists and dents are states of hands and cans respectively, and so there is a clear sense in which they have an adjectival relation to them. Curley’s interpretation succeeds in making sense of modes being particular things, but cannot explain why Spinoza would depart so radically from both Cartesian and ordinary usage without clearly indicating that he has done so. The traditional interpretation defended by Bennett makes Spinoza’s use of the word “mode” continuous with Descartes’ and ordinary usage, but cannot explain why Spinoza does not deny the existence of particular things apart from God. Van Cleve’s interpretation thus has an advantage over both of its rivals insofar as it easily accommodates both considerations.

In order to fit all of the texts, however, the Van Cleve interpretation must be modified in at least one important respect. In 1p28d, Spinoza says that the cause of a finite mode is another mode. In 2p9d, Spinoza paraphrases 1p28d by saying that finite modes are caused by God insofar as he is affected by some finite mode. This suggests that God is a mode insofar as he is affected by a mode. But it also suggests that the mode by which God is affected is a property. And so both God insofar as he is affected by a particular mode – that is, insofar as he exemplifies some property – is a mode and the property that he exemplifies are modes. That is, this text suggests both the Van Cleve interpretation and the traditional interpretation defended by Bennett. But

there is no reason why the traditional interpretation and the Van Cleve interpretation cannot be both right. Modes are defined by Spinoza things which inhere in and are conceived through substance. It is very natural to suppose that both entities like dents and properties inhere in and are conceived through substance. The category of mode would then comprise both properties and objects-exemplifying-properties.

What then can we say in response to Curley's observation that modes of extension are the objects of affirmations and so must have propositional structure as facts do? We can take on board Curley's claim that modes are facts if we allow that facts supervene on modes as they are depicted by the Van Cleve interpretation. Once we have substance and all of its modes, all the facts are fully determined. For example, the fact that the hand is closed supervenes on the fist. The fact that the fist is pounding the table supervenes on the mode which results when fists exemplify table-pounding-ness. Since the facts are nothing over and above the modes, ideas represent and affirm facts in virtue of representing modes.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All citations from Spinoza are from *Spinoza Opera*, ed. C. Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925) (G hereafter). Most English translations are from Edwin Curley ed. and trans., *The Complete Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), with occasional modifications. In citations from the *Ethics*, I use the following abbreviations: the first numeral refers to parts; 'p' means proposition; 'c' means corollary; 's' means scholium; e.g. 4p37s means *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 37, scholium.

<sup>2</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt. 7 vols. Berlin, 1875–90; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1978, vol. 1, p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> My discussion here is indebted to Garrett's "Conatus," and Curley's *Spinoza's Metaphysics*.

<sup>4</sup> See Della Rocca, *Representation* (57–60) and Garrett, "Imagination and Perception," for helpful discussions of how Spinoza can accommodate some of the apparent counterexamples.

<sup>5</sup> Spinoza explicitly commits himself to metaphysical rationalism in 1p11d2, where he writes, "For each thing there must be assigned a cause or reason both for its existence and its nonexistence."

<sup>6</sup> Spinoza gives four arguments for the existence of God. Here I shall focus exclusively on the argument given in 1p11d2.

<sup>7</sup> We might wonder, as Leibniz did, why there couldn't be two substances that shared an attribute but were distinguished by other attributes. For example, why couldn't there be a substance *a* that was *F* and *G* and substance *b* that was *G* and *H*. They would be distinguished by *a*'s possession of *F* and non-possession of *H* and *b*'s possession of *H* and non-possession of *F*. The full response to this objection requires more exposition than would be possible here. But Spinoza's response can be suggested by noting that Spinoza believes that each attribute must be sufficient for distinguishing the substance to which it belongs from every other substance (this follows from 1d4 and 2d2). In the scenario described above, *G* is not sufficient for conceiving of either substance as distinct from the other. For this reason, Spinoza would deny that the scenario describes a possible situation. See Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Substance Monism" (17–22), for an illuminating discussion of this issue.

<sup>8</sup> This is not clearly so. For example, recall the famous problem of the coherence of omnipotence: can God create an object so heavy that even he cannot lift it? I believe however that Spinoza has interesting grounds for believing that the nature of an absolutely perfect being is coherent. See Della Rocca, "Spinoza's Substance Monism" (22–33), and my "Spinoza's Arguments," section 6.

<sup>9</sup> See my "Spinoza's Arguments" for a fuller treatment of this argument as well as a discussion of Spinoza's other arguments for the existence of God. See also Garrett, "Spinoza's 'Ontological' Arguments," 198–223 for a related but interestingly different interpretation of those arguments.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, a full defense of the anti-substantialist interpretation of Spinozistic attributes would require a separate treatment of all the texts upon which the substantialist interpretation rests. Such an exercise falls outside of the scope of the present article.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this feature of Spinozistic ideas, see Della Rocca, "Power of an Idea," and my paper "Spinoza's Account of Akrasia."

<sup>12</sup> I owe this point to an anonymous referee.

<sup>13</sup> Such a theory would be a variant of the field metaphysics that Bennett develops and attributes to Spinoza in his *Study* (212).

<sup>14</sup> Yitzhak Melamed has noted in his "Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance," that a fascinating but unjustly neglected Spinozistic text, Spinoza's *Compendium of the Hebrew Grammar*, provides important evidence for the standard interpretation according to which modes are properties. In that work, Spinoza analogizes the grammatical categories expressed by nouns, adjectives, and participles to the metaphysical categories of substance, attribute, and mode. Because participles are verbal adjectives, this text seems to suggest that modes are properties.

<sup>15</sup> Van Cleve articulates this interpretation in passing in his *Problems from Kant* (212).

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